

# Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

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Dallas, Texas, USA

**Texas A&M Aggies**

**Mike Elko**

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Mike Elko.

MIKE ELKO: Good morning. Excited to be here at my first SEC Media Day. I think it's fitting that we are here in Dallas, given the recent expansion in this conference and what this city means to this state from a recruiting foothold standpoint, now kind of squarely located within the SEC footprint. It's great to be here. Home of current NFL stars Myles Garrett, Von Miller and Justin Madubuike, who all played high school football in and around the DFW area. Always great to be back here.

Like many before me, I want to start by offering my condolences to Lane Kiffin and his family on the passing of his father. Coach Monte Kiffin was a legendary defensive coordinator. I was a young defensive coach when Coach Kiffin was establishing the Tampa 2 system down with the Bucs. He quickly became a defense that everyone was trying to emulate.

I never personally crossed paths with him, but from afar he set the standard of what defensive football should look like. Many of us over the years have tried to emulate it. The majority of us unsuccessfully. That's probably why Lane is coaching on offense.

Our thoughts and prayers are with him and his family through this difficult time. Next I want to recognize a couple of people at Texas A&M, for starters. I want to give another congratulations to cornerback Kevin Smith, former student at Texas A&M. All-American football quarterback for Aggies, went on to be a first-round draft pick for the Dallas Cowboys, three-time Super Bowl champion here in Dallas.

Commissioner Sankey mentioned in his opening statements, Kevin will be inducted into the National Football Foundation College Football Hall of Fame this December and excited to see him recognized for all of his accomplishments.

Texas A&M, we're blessed with tremendous leadership throughout our university and our athletic department. I want to acknowledge Chancellor John Sharp for his tremendous service to our university. He will be retiring in June after 13 years, and we sincerely appreciate all that he has done to make Texas A&M University a better place.

I want to thank our president general Mark Welsh, athletic director Trev Alberts. The current alignment of our university from president to athletic director to head football coach has never been stronger. I'm blessed to be able to collaborate with such innovative thinkers as we navigate this new time in college football.

Also want to mention the three players that are here with me representing Texas A&M today. It's really a unique situation for me coming back after spending four years. I have long-standing relationships with all three of the people that are here this weekend, even though it's my first year as the head football coach.

I want start with our two captains, junior offensive lineman Trey Zuhn from Fort Collins, Colorado. Trey grew up with strong Aggie ties. His mom and dad and his grandma, grandpa, some aunts are Aggies. Trey is a finance major will who will graduate this December with a 3.0 GPA. Trey started 13 games last year and has made 24 starts so far in his career at left tackle, an outstanding leader in our locker room. Trey has been successful both on and off the field at Texas A&M. I was here as the defensive coordinator when he started his career and it's great to be back to watch him finish out his time in Aggieland.

Our other captain is our sophomore linebacker Taurean York from Temple High School in Temple, Texas. Taurean and I go back a really long way. Started recruiting him when I was defensive coordinator at Texas A&M when he was a young prospect. When I transitioned over to Duke, he quickly became a priority for us at our recruiting board at Duke.

After about eight months of recruiting him to Duke, we finally convinced him, I thought, to come join us out in Durham. At the last minute he received an scholarship offer at Texas A&M, decided to stay in-state and go there.



Taurean graduated top 10 in his class. Not top 10 percent. Top 10, with 4.0 GPA, currently a sports management major who aspires to coach one day. Now is the time to give him a formal offer because he's going to be a tremendous leader in this industry.

Last year he started every game for the Aggies at middle linebacker. Earned both Freshman All-American and Freshman All-SEC honors. It's great to finally get a chance to coach him. I'm excited to see where his future goes. Our third representative is junior defensive lineman Shemar Turner.

I've probably known Shemar longer than any other player on our roster. Graduate of nearby DeSoto High School. I started recruiting Shemar back in 2019. To see his growth both on and off the field has truly been extraordinary.

Shemar decided to return for his senior season. He'll graduate this fall with a degree in leadership.

Shemar played in eight games for us as a true freshman during my last season at Texas A&M as defensive coordinator and he was selected to the 2021 All-SEC Freshman team. Since then he's gone on to start 24 games for the Aggies. And he was the second-team all SEC player for us last year. He's poised to have a huge senior season.

Last and certainly not least I want to thank Commissioner Sankey for the leadership he provides within the conference. Under his leadership the SEC has established itself as the premier conference in the country, not only in football but across a lot of our sports platforms.

In this ever-changing landscape of college athletics, leadership is critical. We're fortunate to have a great one leading our conference.

Many have spoken about the changing times of modern college athletics, and we are part of a new era for sure. The landscape in and around our sport in and around college athletics is change constantly. Many of my colleagues part of this era challenging frustrating to navigate. I think it's important today to recognize that it's also a challenging time for our student-athletes. It's true that players today receive significantly more perks for playing college football than ever before. We cannot lose sight of the fact that they're still 18 to 21-year-olds and they're still very much in the developmental stage of their lives.

Mental health issues are at an all-time high across the landscape of college football, the internal, external pressures that come along with this new model can be a lot

for a young man to cope with.

I think it's important now more than ever for us to remember that although the landscape has changed and some of the rules have changed, the overall mission has not.

We're still in the business of developing young people. We're still in the business of developing them to become better people both on and off the field. Developing our players on the field to chase their NFL dreams is obviously critical to our success at Texas A&M and we're fortunate to have the resources and facilities to do that. But it's also important that we continue to enhance them off the field so that they're well prepared for what comes beyond the game.

We want to take pride in pouring as many resources into that area of our program as we do the football so that when our players leave our program, they're ready for whatever comes their way in life.

It's an exciting time at Texas A&M. As we stand here two weeks from training camp like many others, it's an exciting time to get ready to get back on the field.

At my opening press conference, I stated it was time for our program to stop talking about what we are capable of, to roll up our sleeves, go to work and start to fulfill our potential. In the last seven months, that is exactly what we have done.

I'm proud of how quiet our offseason has been. I'm proud of how quickly our players have adapted to a new culture and a new way of attacking football. We have introduced 41 new scholarship football players into our program. Just under 50 percent of our roster has turned over. But it's been awesome to watch them intentionally go out of their way to come together and bond and be ready to put together a tremendous product for Aggie fans to be proud of this fall.

Make no mistake, there's a lot of work still to be done to become the best version of ourselves but we're meeting that challenge head on. I'm excited about our progress. There's never been a better time to be a Texas A&M Aggie. We're excited to get started.

**Q. Obviously you guys have already had to recruit against Oklahoma and Texas. With those two schools now joining the SEC, how does that change that dynamic and does it make any more difficult for you?**

MIKE ELKO: No, I don't think so. I think obviously there have been recruiting wars in this state between those three

schools that have probably started before I was born. It certainly continued in my time here as the defensive coordinator and I'm sure will continue into the foreseeable future.

So those three brands hold a lot of weight in this state. There's no doubt about it. I think obviously that's the group that you're consistently recruiting against, and the people that win those battles more frequently are going to be the teams that have the most success.

**Q. In the past, the glaring advantage that A&M had over in-state rival Texas in recruiting was that you were all in the SEC. But with that now gone, do you see it becoming more, like in the history of recruiting being some kids are Longhorn kids and some are Aggie kids, why or why not would you agree or disagree with that?**

MIKE ELKO: I don't know. I think each kid's gotta go through their process and kind of figure out what the right fit for them is. I don't know that a league gives you necessarily that leg up. I think we've got to build a program that people want to be part of. And I think it's no secret that recruiting in the state of Texas is extremely competitive. I think it's not only us and Texas. I think it's also a lot of other programs now coming in here. You see that in this cycle that we've got to fend off. And I think our focus isn't just on one school. I think our focus is on going out and identifying the kids that we think can help us win a national championship and trying to get them to Kyle Field and Texas A&M.

I don't think that is a one-on-one situation anymore. I think this has changed a lot. I think there's a lot more schools involved in that now.

**Q. You often hear coaches reflect back on the problems they were able to overcome in year one, year two, maybe even year three, in building a program. Is there any way you can speed that process up in year one and do you already feel you're maybe ahead of the curve?**

MIKE ELKO: I think in this era of college football you better speed that process up. I don't think this is a very patient era. I don't think you come to a school like Texas A&M that has the ability to do what we're capable of doing and you want to talk about building for a future, but I think you've got to be careful that you don't skip steps along the way. I think you've got to establish a culture. You've got to establish identity. You've got to establish a way that you want to play football.

I'm excited because I think our kids have embraced that. I

think they've bought into what we want to be about. They've embraced the direction we want to go. And I'm really, really happy with the progress we've made in my first seven months on the job, and now we've got to go finish that and be successful this fall.

**Q. Are you guys using artificial intelligence at all within your program, whether data analytics, health-related things, et cetera?**

MIKE ELKO: No, not yet. I think some of those conversations have started off the record with roles in which AI can be utilized. Right now I think we're still in using our analysts, using our data reports and kind of coming up with our own style of analytics, but I think that is certainly something that has started to get on the periphery of conversation, and I think maybe in the three, four, five years to come I think you might start seeing that kind of move forward into this game a little bit more.

**Q. On the Texas A&M rivalry, what has been the biggest rivalry you've been a part of? I don't know if it's something in South Brunswick, New Jersey or in college football. And have you envisioned what the November 30th atmosphere is going to be like?**

MIKE ELKO: Yeah, it would be hard to equate something that happened in South Brunswick, New Jersey to this rivalry. Obviously the Duke/Carolina rivalry is a fairly big one. And being part of that the last two years certainly gives you a taste of what it's like.

I was here for four years. We didn't play Texas at all. It was very clear to me what our fans and alumni thought of the university. Now that we're playing it, we're in the same conference again, that's something that means an awful lot to Texas A&M people so it means a lot to our program.

**Q. Where has the team made strides on the offensive line an area of concerns in the area of protecting quarterbacks and whatnot?**

MIKE ELKO: It started with the work we put in the offseason with Coach Moffitt. I think we challenged those guys to get bigger, to get stronger, to get a little bit more flexible.

I think we've stayed healthier. I think that's been a big piece of it. I think if you look back to the last couple of years, we've gone into training camp with parts of that group limited and not able to practice maybe the way they wanted to and that always hurts your ability to get the cohesion and being able to get to the level you want to get to.



I just think we have to be intentional about how we put those kids in position to be successful. It's not lost on anybody that our ability to keep our quarterback healthy is going to play a huge role in our ability to have success this year. Some of that is on the offensive line but that's a program conversation. What we're doing, what we're asking them to do, the decision-making, the quarterbacks running, the system, how we call it, what we do. It's across the board we've got to take some stress off of that group, too, and allow them to go out there and have some success.

**Q. You lost some key veteran production at wide receiver last year. In a perfect world, do you see one guy separating himself to try to replace some of that production or do you feel like you have a group that can kind of come together and replace some of that together?**

MIKE ELKO: I think if you look at the best offenses in this conference it's usually not one guy. It's usually a handful of players that can threaten a defense based on match-up, based on coverage leverage, based on who they're trying to take away.

I think it's critical for all of our wide receivers to take the next step this offseason and come out this year and perform at a high level. I think we're excited about some of the guys that we do have returning.

I think Noah Thomas has had a phenomenal season. I think Jahdae Walker has had a great offseason. We're happy with what Moose Muhammad has done. Cyrus Allen will be a huge addition for us. And John Bostick will help us. I think we've got the pieces in place. We've just got to go out there and continue to develop that group so that they can kind of become what they're capable of becoming consistently. I think that's the biggest thing.

**Q. Can you tell us some of the thoughts that went into the move of Shemar Turner going from playing outside on the defense to playing primarily inside?**

MIKE ELKO: I think a big piece of that was I think that was the intention when we recruited him. We felt like that was probably his best position moving forward to the next level. And I think for whatever reason that just kind of didn't go all the way over the last two years. So I think that was a big piece in his decision to come back was to be able to slide inside, to play defensive tackle to showcase his ability to do that for the NFL and to kind of enhance his ability to get into that league and get in there and maybe higher draft status.

So I think it's a natural progression for him. He's a big,

physical kid. He's got tremendous athleticism. He's a plus pass rusher. He's a tremendous run-stopper. So I think he's going to have a phenomenal year for us this year in there.

**Q. The last coach that left Duke in 1990 and came to the SEC was Steve Spurrier. Worked out pretty well. Could you talk about what you learned at Duke in your years there, and you won nine games at Duke. That's like having a great hockey team in the Everglades. Tough to do. Most people think it can never happen. How much has that prepared you for life coming back to A&M and then bringing Texas in to compete with? You've got to love the competition, I would think.**

MIKE ELKO: I've said this to a lot of people in the last two years, when you're an assistant coach, you think you know everything it takes to become a head coach. But until you go sit in that chair, you have no idea -- you have no idea how much of the program, you had no idea was being handled by that coach. I think anytime you get in that chair, you grow. I'm extremely thankful to all the people at Duke. Athletic director Nina King gave me an opportunity to be a head football coach and I'm grateful for what she did for me there. I think we had tremendous players in that football program. Maybe more so than people wanted to give us credit for.

So a lot of that was development. But a lot of that was thanks to David Cutcliffe and the job he did before we got there, but I think being in that chair is the only way to prepare to be in that chair. And certainly now coming back into this conference, the premier conference in the country that got even stronger this year, certainly that experience is something you want to lean on as you try to build this program to become what we want to be at Texas A&M.

**Q. You were in Aggieland before you left and you're back. What are you looking forward to most about the culture of Aggieland?**

MIKE ELKO: I think the biggest thing is being able to actually come out of the tunnel on to the field on game day. I think one of the things that people don't know is I spent all of my time in the press box.

I've never actually gotten to experience Kyle Field from field level. So certainly saw some memorable moments. The seven overtime win over LSU. The upset with Alabama. To see those from above was amazing. I can't imagine what that atmosphere actually feels like at ground level. I'm excited to lead our team down the tunnel for the first time against Notre Dame and hear Aggieland erupt live and in person. I think that's going to be a really special feeling.

**Q. You opened the season with Notre Dame. Do you like opening the season with an opponent of that caliber when it comes to preparing your team for what to expect the rest of the year?**

MIKE ELKO: I'm a football coach. I'd like to play no teams of that caliber, but I guess we have to. It goes both ways. I think the benefit of having a game like that in the opener is you have everyone's attention. I think our program is very much aware that we have to be firing on all cylinders the first time we run out of the tunnel. I think that's created urgency in our program that goes all the way back to January, when it got announced that College Game Day was coming to town. It lit the fire even more. I think when you get into those dog days of training camp where kids start to drag and get tired it's really easy to flash up there a logo of a big opener and get their attention back really quick.

From that perspective, it's really good. Sometimes you would like maybe a game to get the rust off, but it's going to be a level playing field for both of us. So we'll go out there and put our best foot forward.

**Q. You mentioned in your opening statement, but Texas A&M is a place at times has been very loud and this offseason you've chosen to be very quiet. What's gone into that?**

MIKE ELKO: I just think you earn the right to have success in the game of football. I think that's a recipe that has stood the test of time. And that's what the offseason is about. The offseason is about being in places where nobody's watching, where no one's following you on Instagram, where nobody's posting about what you're doing and getting up every day and going to work to become better so that you have a chance to have the success that you want to have in the fall.

So I don't know that I intentionally changed our thought process at Texas A&M. I think that's how I believe programs should be. I think when it's not football time, we should be working, and that's what gets you ultimately the results you want to have in the fall.

So I'm just proud that we've been able to do that so quickly in College Station.

**Q. You mentioned Tommy Moffitt earlier, so in this seven-month period I was wondering what he has brought to your program and the relationship that you had with Tommy maybe before to hire him with the Aggies.**

MIKE ELKO: It was interesting. Everyone always asks about offensive coordinator. I'm a defensive-minded head coach. You get hired and everyone wants to talk about who is the OC, who is the OC? But in truth, sometimes, the most important hire you make is the strength and conditioning coach because that guy spends so much time with your team. He establishes your toughness level and establishes your culture and establishes your discipline level.

We took a lot of time to kind of research and make that hire. I had never met Coach Moffitt in my career. We had had one of his assistants on our staff at Duke, so I knew of him.

When I dug into him and really started interviewing and talking to him, I was blown away by how modern he was. When you have a guy who has had as much success as he has and resumé as long as he does, three national championships for three different head coaches, you anticipate maybe there being a little bit of an old school thought process, and it was the exact opposite.

He's extremely well-read. He's modern. He's into sports science at the highest level. He's into training our kids at maximum efficiency, and those were the things that were really important to me.

So when I identified that here was a guy that had had the amount of success that he had but had kind of modified his program over the years to change with the times, it was a no-brainer for me to try to bring him into College Station.

**Q. There seems to be a wide range of opinions with Connor Weigman. Some people were projecting him to be a first-round pick next year. Other people might rank him in the middle of the conference in terms of quarterbacks. What do you think he needs to do to hit that ceiling that people have that first-round pick ceiling?**

MIKE ELKO: I think he just needs to focus on the day to day of becoming a great quarterback. Obviously he was playing at a high level through six games. Unfortunately he got the injury in the Auburn game. Two as a true freshman, four last year. He got the injury in the Auburn game and the rehab for that was long and tiresome, and now he's back. He's healthy. He's moving around the way he wants to. I just think he needs to take the next step and it's his third year of college football but he's only played six games.

He's got a packed experience into his brain that he's got to earn off the field. So I think that's going to be critical for him as we move forward.

**Q. 12-team playoffs with us now. What does that do for schools other than Georgia and Alabama, which sort of have a pretty good road to it each year, what does it do for everybody else?**

MIKE ELKO: I think spending four years in this conference, there were a lot of years where I felt like there were more teams deserving of being in the playoff. I felt like at times, certainly for us in 2020, I feel like this conference has clearly established itself to be the premier conference. And now what you have is more access. So I think if you look at the College World Series as a model, more access has led to a lot more All-SEC semifinals, All-SEC championships, I believe you're going to see something very similar in the College Football Playoff. I think the more teams from this conference that get in and get to compete in meaningful games on a national scale, I think it will only help us enhance our reputation as the premier league in the country.

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